

# **Between isolation and resilience: life in a Florida farmworker community at the times of coronavirus**

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Only a couple of months ago, coronavirus still seemed like a distant threat to most people in the U.S. I then came across an [article](#) that, to make a case for concern, brushed off the old brain teaser of the pond and the lily pad. You have a pond of a given size, and upon that pond, a single lily pad. The lily pad reproduces once a day: on day two, you have two lily pads; on day three, you have four, and so on. If it takes the lily pads 48 days to cover the pond completely, how many days until the lake is covered halfway? The answer is 47 days – with the footnote that, at day 40, you'll barely know the lily pads are there. Now replace lily pads with coronavirus. And here is the takeaway: when something dangerous is growing exponentially, everything looks fine until it doesn't. The downward spiral is then not only inevitable but also, and perhaps more importantly, steeper where vulnerability is already high.

In Immokalee, Florida, where I am based, there are about 25'000 farmworkers, mainly Latinos and Haitians. Most of them live in single-wide trailers, sometimes accommodating up to 10-12 people, all using the same cramped bathroom and kitchen. Every day, they ride to work in fully-loaded, repurposed school buses or vans, shoulder-to-shoulder with 30-40 strangers. Maintaining social distance is, then, effectively impossible in nearly all aspects of their daily life. Sheltering in place, too, is hardly a feasible option, let alone an effective one due to overcrowding. Most farm workers cannot afford not to go to work despite being afraid to get sick. At the same time, they have such poor access to health care that they cannot afford to get sick either. People here have always lived on the brink. But what is going on right now is unprecedented. We are at a dead-end, with little sign of a plan to stave off the dire consequences for us, but also the Florida agricultural industry and the food supply of the entire United States.

State authorities are indeed taking only mitigation measures, rather than developing a plan to address the unpreparedness of our community for the looming health crisis. They are sharing scant information about the spread of the virus and engaging little with civil society and the local community at large. We, at the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, spent weeks in sluggish negotiations on behalf of the thousands of farmworkers we represent. Seeing little results coming from it, in April we resolved to launch a petition addressed to the Governor and State authorities. Our crucial request was to establish a field hospital, or alternative care facility, in Immokalee to provide treatment for COVID-19 patients with severe symptoms, and a separate quarantine space to allow workers with milder symptoms to self-isolate. We also asked to scale up the local testing effort and to require agricultural employers to provide personal protective gear for farmworkers. But the sanitary emergency is only the tipping point of the iceberg. As market demand is plummeting, many farmworkers will see no income for months. For this reason, we urged for the allocation of public funds for economic relief for Florida farmworkers.

It took a month for a response to arrive. Finally, from May 3 to 5, State and local health officials arranged a large-scale testing site in Immokalee. On the first day alone, a total of 440 tests took place, almost three times more than over the entire month of April. The latest figures show that hundreds of Immokalee residents understood the importance of this opportunity to learn if they had contracted the virus. At the same time, greater collaboration with local civil society organizations, including us, would have ensured better logistics. For instance, the site's opening hours conflicted in part with the hours of a typical working day in the fields. There is, therefore, a risk that farm workers leave town and follow the season north without having been tested. At this point, though, what matters most is the implementation of the next steps. I am thinking in particular of ensuring active contact tracing, providing quarantine space for people with the virus, and arranging transportation for those in need of hospitalization. Local health authorities, indeed, turned down our request for a field hospital in Immokalee on the ground that the hospitals in our nearest city have not yet reached full capacity. We view this decision as highly problematic, considering that Immokalee lacks medical infrastructure, the local population density is 172% higher than the state average, and additional risk factors are widespread among farmworkers. But at least we hope that authorities will devise and share a plan before hospitals reach capacity.

Amid all of this, and early on in the crisis, we realized that it was crucial to build awareness about the virus within our community. Like we have done for the past twenty years, we went house by house, listening to the needs of our community, reflecting on them, and using our voice to build a collective one. We circulated multilingual educational materials in town and posted flyers in stores and on social media to educate workers about risks the virus poses. The CIW's Women Group also sewed hundreds of protective masks, which we freely distributed to workers and community members. But the tool that is proving the most versatile and crucial is perhaps our community radio, Radio Conciencia. Tune in at any time of the day, and you will likely come across anything, from the usual, old-fashioned, Latino tunes, to short pieces on prevention and commented readings of science articles, to experiences from daily life in the fields under the pandemic. We have also replaced our Wednesday weekly meetings with a long format radio discussion with experts, local authorities, as well as other worker organizations across the nation. More than ever, the radio is proving an easily accessible window on the world and a tool to break isolation and fear.

We have also tried to bring improvements to the working conditions in the fields. Since 2011, we run the Fair Food Program, a partnership among farmers, farmworkers, and retail food companies that ensures humane wages and working conditions for the workers who pick fruits and vegetables on participating farms. When the pandemic began, amid the total disdain from local authorities, we focused our conversation with participating growers on measures to increase safety in their farms. Some results came along from that. For instance, some growers have started buying groceries for their crews to help blunt the economic impact of the pandemic and avoid countless individual trips to the store. One grower, in particular, loaned seven hand-washing stations to be placed at labor pick up locations throughout Immokalee. We are also trying to partner with other organizations to provide some economic relief for farmworkers, which is going to be even more important as President Trump's administration is looking to cut wages for migrant workers.

What we have achieved so far, and are working on, is only a glimmer of light in the COVID-19 darkness. But even this would not have been possible without the Fair Food Program. There is cause for comfort and faith in that, but also reflection. It took us years, allies, and actions across an entire nation to build resilience inside our community and systemic change in the agriculture industry. The current situation requires speedy responses, allows limited mobility, and makes it hard to collectively identify priorities and ways to tackle them. Some questions, then, arise for us. What is the potential of alliances between consumers and producers in cases like the ongoing emergency, where infrastructural and large-scale resources are required? How do solidarity networks respond to threats like COVID-19, which look like great equalizers, but in reality, amplify pre existing inequalities? What are the resources that are likely to be more needed and sorely missing for our vulnerable communities? What is the scale of the networks capable of making these resources available quickly and timely?

These questions are going to stay with us even after the current sanitary crisis and cannot go unanswered. For one thing, in all likelihood, we will face again – and soon – a new wave of this or another similarly dangerous virus. Thinking about global networks to produce and distribute medical equipment, most notably testing kits and respiratory machines, seems then a more than temporary necessity. A second reason is that entire countries are going through large-scale social experiments as part of the learning process to cope with the virus. Farmworkers, like other essential workers, are caught in one of the most extensive and dangerous social experiments of all. Unprotected, jammed in overcrowded spaces, vulnerable and often forgotten: they are more than ever being treated as dispensable. At the same time, as the risk of food shortages ranks high in the mind of consumers, farmworkers are enjoying unprecedented visibility. It is urgent to reflect on how to make the most of this visibility. Here in Immokalee, years of workers organization provided us the resilience to respond to the current situation and bring the most urgent needs of our community to the attention of the public. And part of our message was precisely this: the threat to farmworkers is a threat to the entire nation, because there will be no food if food workers get sick. What spaces for actions does this visibility allow to build for essential workers more broadly? How can we use it to keep up with the fast-forwarding of political processes produced by the current crisis? One thing is for sure. The claims and strategies that we devise now, to cope with extraordinary situations like the current one, are the next frontier of workers' struggles for dignity.